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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [SNAR](#) [KDEM](#) [SMIG](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES OPTIMISTIC ABOUT
PEACEFUL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador James Derham for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a six-day pre-election trip, poloffs visited 14 municipalities in seven departments throughout western and southwestern Guatemala, including nine municipalities identified as "conflictive areas." TSE delegates expressed confidence in election preparations despite weather forecasts of heavy rain. Most local officials were optimistic about peaceful elections although some, especially in historically contentious municipalities, expressed concern about violence. Municipal police bemoaned a shortage of personnel and lack of an electoral security plan, and hoped for military and police reinforcement on election day. Representatives of Catholic Social Services and NGOs identified lack of employment and lack of infrastructure as the biggest social problems. In Santiago Atitlan, "social cleansing" groups were threatening community leaders, while in Aguacatan, Huehuetenango, the re-elected mayor (UNE) had been run out of town by the opposition. End summary.

¶2. (U) Poloffs visited 14 municipalities in seven departments (Quiche, Escuintla, Retalhuleu, San Marcos, Solola, Suchitepequez, and Huehuetenango) in the western and southwestern regions, including nine municipalities identified by the GOG and OAS as "conflictive areas," during a six-day pre-election trip August 31 to September 5. The areas were designated "conflictive" based on reports of acts of violence against political candidates and activists, influence of narcotrafficking, ethnic or territorial problems, and burning of ballots, protests, or other conflict in past elections.

¶3. (U) Poloffs met with 52 local officials, including mayors, mayoral candidates, Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) delegates, municipal police, civil registrars, and representatives of Catholic Social Services, local election monitoring NGO Mirador Electoral, and other NGOs, to discuss election preparations, security, socio-economic problems, migration, and community needs. Poloffs encountered campaign rallies, party caravans, training sessions for political party representatives, and TSE coordination meetings. On Guatemala's National Day of Migrants (September 2), poloffs spoke with the Director of USG-supported Casa de Migrantes at a festival highlighting migrant rights in the Mexican-Guatemalan border town of Tecun Uman.

Electoral Preparations and Voter Participation

¶4. (U) TSE representatives in most of the municipalities expressed confidence that they would be ready in time for election day and were optimistic about peaceful, fair, and transparent elections despite predictions of violence in

historically conflictive areas, and the daunting task of delivering thousands of telegrams to inhabitants in remote villages to notify them of where to vote.

¶15. (U) Cuyotenango TSE representative Blanca Elizabeth Sosa said that they have only two contractors on foot to deliver 10,000 telegrams and that the high rate of illiteracy (75 percent) was a problem, although neighbors were spreading the information by word of mouth. In Retalhuleu, TSE contractors were delivering 12,000-15,000 telegrams. In Champerico, 6,000 telegrams were still waiting to be delivered. In some municipalities, radio broadcasts and computer kiosks were also providing information to voters.

¶16. (C) TSE representatives also expressed some concern over access to polling stations in rural areas, especially in the event of rain in areas that normally require fording of rivers. OAS International Observer Rossana Amarilla noted that distances to polling stations in Escuintla were not long, but the almost daily rain has limited access, especially in desolate, rural areas with no bridges or paved roads. Her primary concerns were voter confusion over where to vote, lack of sufficient police coverage, and the possibility of partisan squabbling over mayoral results.

¶17. (U) Escuintla Governor Jorge Arturo Nava Mendia estimated that 45 percent of the population had not updated their voter data due to lack of interest in the elections. He noted the abstention of voters in past elections due to lack of information on where to vote, and also noted the difficulty of vehicular access to voting centers due to rain.

¶18. (SBU) Mazatenango Mirador Electoral volunteer Maria Alejandra Barrios said former members of local civilian defense patrols (PACs), formed by the government during the

internal conflict, may demonstrate at voting centers and block highways as part of their effort to receive compensation from the government, but the demonstrations would not be violent. In her view, voters could be deterred from voting by long lines, rain, and polls showing their candidates far ahead of or behind the front-runners. Tiquisate Mirador Electoral observer Herbert Arriaza expressed concerns over the TSE's lack of organization and training for its 4,000 volunteers, the many errors in registration data entry, and alleged manipulation of the decentralization process by local TSE authorities, forcing some voters to travel further from their homes.
Electoral Security

¶19. (C) Police stressed the importance of securing citizens, right to vote, but cited lack of personnel to provide adequate security at polling stations. While there was some coordination between police and the TSE on electoral security, most police and TSE officials seemed unaware of electoral security plans despite the need for intensified security on election day. Mazatenango Police Sub-Commissioner Romulo Bracomonte Aguilar (protect) acknowledged that Mazatenango had no electoral security plan and that its seven police were insufficient. He noted that a police officer was murdered the day before in an apparent targeted killing. Mazatenango averages five to six murders per month, with violent crime on the rise due to gangs and narcotraffickers. According to Bracomonte, gangs operate in the central open-air market, demanding bribes from vendors.

¶10. (U) The TSE representative in Santa Catarina Palopo anticipated 80 percent participation in this year's municipal elections, as in previous elections, and no problems. He recalled that the only election-related problem occurred twelve years ago, when the mayor won by just three votes and supporters of the losing party disrupted public order, cutting power lines and throwing rocks in the streets.

¶11. (C) In contrast to more conflictive areas, Retalhuleu Police Officer Recinos Godinez expressed confidence in electoral security, saying that his department will not have any problems. Retalhuleu will have 360 police and 200

auxiliary military, with an unspecified number of national-level police, on election day. He noted, however, that there could be trouble in a neighboring municipality where the son of a mayor was murdered last year.

¶12. (C) In Aguacatan, Huehuetenango, which was singled out in local press by Vice President Stein as a historically conflictive area, TSE representative Marisol Rivas said the TSE has clear indicators of conflict on election day. She

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said there were three politically motivated murders last year, including that of the mayor's bodyguard, but the police were evasive and unresponsive to requests for increased security. UNE party representative Jorge Gustavo Palacios said he met with the TSE to press for security and requested an additional 250 police and 250 soldiers as reinforcement on election day. (Note: Given Guatemala's limited police force of approximately 18,000, it is unlikely that the request will be granted. End note.)

Police Corruption and Reform

¶13. (C) Santiago Police Agent Otto Sanchez (protect) characterized the Minister of Government's plan to purge and reform the police as "a political matter." He asserted that every government institution is rife with corruption, from the most senior to the most junior level, and that senior police with 20 to 25 years in the service as well as rookies were concerned about losing their jobs.

¶14. (C) Santa Catarina Palopo Police Agent Santiago Vinoso (protect) defended the police, saying that like any family, some members were good, some were bad, and that corruption was an unfortunate consequence of meager salaries. Second-in-Command Police Inspector Vega Castillo (protect) in the highly conflictive municipality of Patzite expressed frustration over the lack of personnel and the bad reputation of the police, complaining that the police were blamed for all the "bad things that happen in the movies." Most police officers acknowledged the presence of narcotraffickers in their community, but claimed to have no proof or details of persons involved. Most police stations were bare-bones operations, with only a typewriter, filing cabinet, telephone, and radio, and one agent on duty.

Migration and Remittances

¶15. (U) A festive celebration in honor of the National Day of

Migrants (September 2) was underway in the central plaza of the Mexican-Guatemalan border town of Tecun Uman when Poloffs arrived. A large banner in Spanish read: "Don't call us terrorists. We seek a better life. Open the borders." Second-in-Command Police Officer Enemio Cruz Palma, estimated that 50 percent of the population had relatives in the U.S., mostly in L.A., and that alien smugglers charge Q5 (less than 1 USD) to cross the Suchiate River into Mexico.

¶16. (SBU) Director of USG-supported Casa de Migrantes Ademar Barilli estimated that his organization, which provides public awareness of the risks of migration and provides food, shelter, clothing and incidental expenses, assisted 5,000 migrants thus far this year, about 30 to 40 migrants per day, most of them from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Alien smugglers charge USD 4,000-5,000 per person to go to the U.S. According to Barilli, many migrants, especially in the border area, are vulnerable to trafficking in persons and abuse, but very few file legal complaints due to fear of retaliation. About ten percent are minors.

¶17. (SBU) Barilli was dismissive of the elections, saying that candidates were only concerned with remittances and votes, not with the welfare of migrants. He expressed frustration with the central government, saying that senior government officials were well aware of the plight of migrants but continued to fail to provide concrete results.

¶18. (U) In El Rodeo, San Marcos, Father Silverio Chum of Catholic Social Services estimated that about 10 percent of the population of 12,000 (one member in each family) migrated to the U.S., with some returning home to stay after a few years abroad. He said the biggest social problem was lack of work or poorly paid work (as low as USD 1 per day). Many coffee farm workers were laid off when coffee prices dropped.

As a result, many migrated to the U.S., which he said has had positive and negative consequences. Families have received remittances, but migration has also resulted in family separation. Many women whose husbands migrated to the U.S. began relationships with other men, who used the women's remittances to support their own families. He noted that remittances have become a disincentive for many teenagers to find work, and that many people spend their remittances on consumer goods rather than saving or investing.

Santiago Atitlan: Clandestine "Social Cleansing"

¶19. (C) In the seemingly tranquil lakeside town of Santiago Atitlan, where villagers ousted the military after a massacre during the internal armed conflict, clandestine "social cleansing" groups allegedly have re-introduced societal conflict, breeding fear among citizens and threatening community leaders.

¶20. (C) According to Ruben Gonzalez, representative of Rome-based social service organization Order of Malta, the mayor, police, and Public Ministry are involved in the social cleansing groups, which are comprised of ex-combatants, ex-military, and ex-guerrillas. The groups have already eliminated 30 persons this year. According to a local UNE party official, Santiago has three social cleansing groups but the local police have taken no action because they are afraid.

¶21. (C) Police Officer Otto Sanchez (protect) acknowledged the existence of social cleansing and vigilantism by a group of 10-15 persons, who are known by the community but have no political affiliation and often fight over land. Mayor Diego Esquina Mendoza affirmed the existence of social cleansing but said he did not know who was involved or where the groups originated. He also acknowledged the existence of gangs, noting that 10 percent of youths in Santiago were gang members and that insecurity was a nationwide problem, but that only two percent of crimes in Santiago was violent.

¶22. (C) Felipe Coche Pablo (protect) of Catholic Social Services feared that Santiago, the site of intense conflict between the army and guerrillas 1980-1990, was returning to an era of conflict as a result of three or four clandestine groups that have been threatening community leaders and narcotraffickers. Coche received an anonymous death threat in December 2006 signed by "Los Defensores Revolucionarios Pueblo Maya" and filed a complaint with the Public Ministry, but received no response. His brother, head of the Association of Community Economic Development for the Canton of Panabaj (ADECCAP), fled Santiago after receiving an anonymous death threat a few weeks ago. He speculated that the threat was related to ADECCAP's post-Stan reconstruction

project, which involves significant economic interests.

¶23. (C) Coche noted that the clandestine groups were becoming more powerful than the mayor and that many townspeople were afraid to talk to strangers out of fear of saying the wrong thing and becoming the target of threats. He did not trust the police whom he believed were in contact with the clandestine groups as well as with narcotraffickers. He said that some members were arrested and detained this year on charges of extortion but released on bail.

¶24. (C) Both Coche and TSE delegate Herber Jovany Quezada reported rumors that there would be conflict, most likely instigated by UNE and Comité Civico, if the incumbent mayor (Union Democrática) wins the elections because most people do not like him and consider him ineffective in addressing the

security problem. Order of Malta's Gonzalez said that the mayor would be killed if re-elected. He predicted, however, that if the 1,900 ex-PACs in Santiago are paid by the GOG this week, they would vote for the GANA mayoral candidate, ensuring GANA's victory.

Aguacatan, Huehuetenango: The Wild, Wild West

¶25. (U) In Aguacatan, the most contentious municipality visited by poloffs, local officials told us that the 2003 elections deeply divided the community after the opposition alleged electoral fraud and corruption by TSE officials who were related to the re-elected mayor. Though declared the official winner, the mayor was unable to take office in the municipal building due to widespread protests. He set up office in the neighboring village of Rio San Juan while the police fled to Huehuetenango out of fear, leaving Aguacatan's 40,000 inhabitants without government services or municipal security.

¶26. (C) UNE municipal representative Jorge Gustavo Palacios (protect) said he has received anonymous threatening phone calls and showed poloffs photos, which he alleged constituted proof of threats to local party supporters. He provided us his name and position, seemingly as a last testimonial, in the event of his death. Vice mayoral candidate Gaspar Mendez (protect), who owned the building housing the UNE municipal headquarters, had also received anonymous death threats. They alleged that Partido Patriota advocated the use of violence and were responsible for the threats.

¶27. (C) Poloffs visited Aguacatan Mayor Pablo Escobar Mendez in neighboring Rio San Juan. The mayor was accompanied by several bodyguards armed with rifles. The mayor, wearing a bullet proof vest, arrived with four bodyguards from his residence to meet with us in the heavily guarded, fortress-like building which serves as the ad hoc municipal hall of Aguacatan. Despite an assassination attempt last year in which his bodyguard was killed and his spouse wounded, the mayor seemed calm and confident about his chances of re-election. He planned to relocate to Aguacatan and retake control of the official municipal building upon re-election.

¶28. (C) According to the mayor, the current local conflict stems from a long-standing rivalry between two indigenous ethnic groups who years ago united under one municipality. Although Aguacatan has remained as one municipality, deep-seated differences remain, with one group dominating the area north of the central plaza and the mayor's supporters dominating the area south of the plaza. After the 2003 elections, six political parties protested the election results over allegations of fraud and corruption, and demanded his resignation. Protesters burned tires and blocked highways, including the Pan-American Highway between Quezaltenango and Huehuetenango. Despite the protests, Mayor Escobar refused to resign because the six parties "did not represent the law." The six parties eventually took control of the municipality and forced the UNE mayor and his supporters out of Aguacatan. The mayor now lives with his 24-hour bodyguards and often works out of his house in Rio San Juan, while his wife and children live elsewhere due to security concerns.

Comment

¶29. (C) The dedication and enthusiasm of most TSE officials and electoral volunteers to ensure free, fair, and democratic elections -- despite overwhelming logistical challenges and lack of resources -- were impressive. Incidents of previous electoral violence and conflicts appeared to be long-standing localized problems centering mostly on mayoral races. Across the board, all the local government officials we met

downplayed the possibility of electoral fraud or violence, noting that there may be small problems, but nothing serious. There appeared to be an emerging trend of incumbent mayors switching from local civic committees to national parties in

an effort to remain in power, garner name recognition, and access financial support for their re-election campaigns and municipalities. Visits to over a dozen municipal police offices throughout the country highlighted the shortage of resources to address electoral security needs and to combat the common problems of narcotrafficking and violent crime. Visits to poor, rural areas showcased communities, economic dependence on remittances and the impact of lack of local employment. Everyone, with the exception of one suspicious police officer who asked if we were from CICIG, was receptive to meeting with the Embassy.

Derham